Relational Permanence & Healing Ambiguous Loss among Young Adults with Foster Care Backgrounds

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Outline

- Review of purpose and focus of study

- Research Design and Method

- Theory of Ambiguous Loss

- Findings

- Implications for Direct Child Welfare Practice

Understanding relational (Im)Permanence among youth in care

- ❑ Need for studies that extend beyond the use of only system-level measures for outcomes of success (e.g., permanence as solely legal adoption/reunification)—how do the people who receive the "service" actually experience it?!

- ❑ Need for theories and methods that capture the complexities of learning to navigate multifamily memberships & loyalties, family loss/ambiguity and adversity, and engaging processes of healing and resilience across the life course that are normative to THIS population during and after their time in foster care

Appreciation and Gratitude To...

- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

- Opportunity Passport™ grantees that participated in this study

- La Shaun Brooks, Chapin Hall Data Collection Manager, Interviewer

- The 29 young adults who participated in this study

Opportunity Passport™

- Package of resources to support successful transitions to adulthood until age 24:
  - Matched savings account
  - Personal banking account for short-term use
  - "door openers" which include opportunities to access education, housing, jobs and internships

- Financial literacy and Asset Building core elements of Initiative

Exploring Permanence

What we know:

Feeling connected to an adult is associated with positive outcomes as this group ages out of the foster care system.

What this study sought to know more about:

- The quality of relationships young adults have/don't have and with whom:
  - Biological family systems
  - Foster family systems
  - Professionals and non-kin adults
  - Peers/significant others
- How their past familial histories and foster care experiences together shape their perceptions of their existing relationships as permanent or ambiguous

Goals of Study:
Answer Targeted Research Questions

- What supportive relationships do these young adults have? With whom?

- What types of relationships and supports are missing in their lives?

- What are the ways these young adults define support and feeling connected?

- How do they think of permanence (legally, socio-emotionally, etc.)? Who do they feel will (and won't) be a part of their personal network across their life course?

- According to these young adults, what factors (e.g., personal, programmatic, foster care status) affect having long-term, supportive relationships?

About the Study

- ❑ 4 Opportunity Passport™ grantees were selected to participate in this study
    - ▪ Representing Regional Location-South, Midwest, East Coast, West Coast

- ❑ We were able to interview 7 young adults from each site

- ❑ Consent forms were obtained from all young adults and necessary state guardian administrators

Data Collection & Management

- Social Network Maps (Antonucci, 1986)

- In-depth interviews guided by social network maps

- All interviews audio taped and transcribed with self-chosen pseudonyms used to identify quotations

- Data downloaded into NVivo a qualitative data management and analysis program

- Use of constant comparison and Grounded Theory Methods of analysis (Schatzman, 1991)

Constructing a Personal Network Map (Antonucci, 1986).

"People you are so close to it is hard to imagine life without them."

"People you may not feel quite that close to but who are still important to you."

YOU
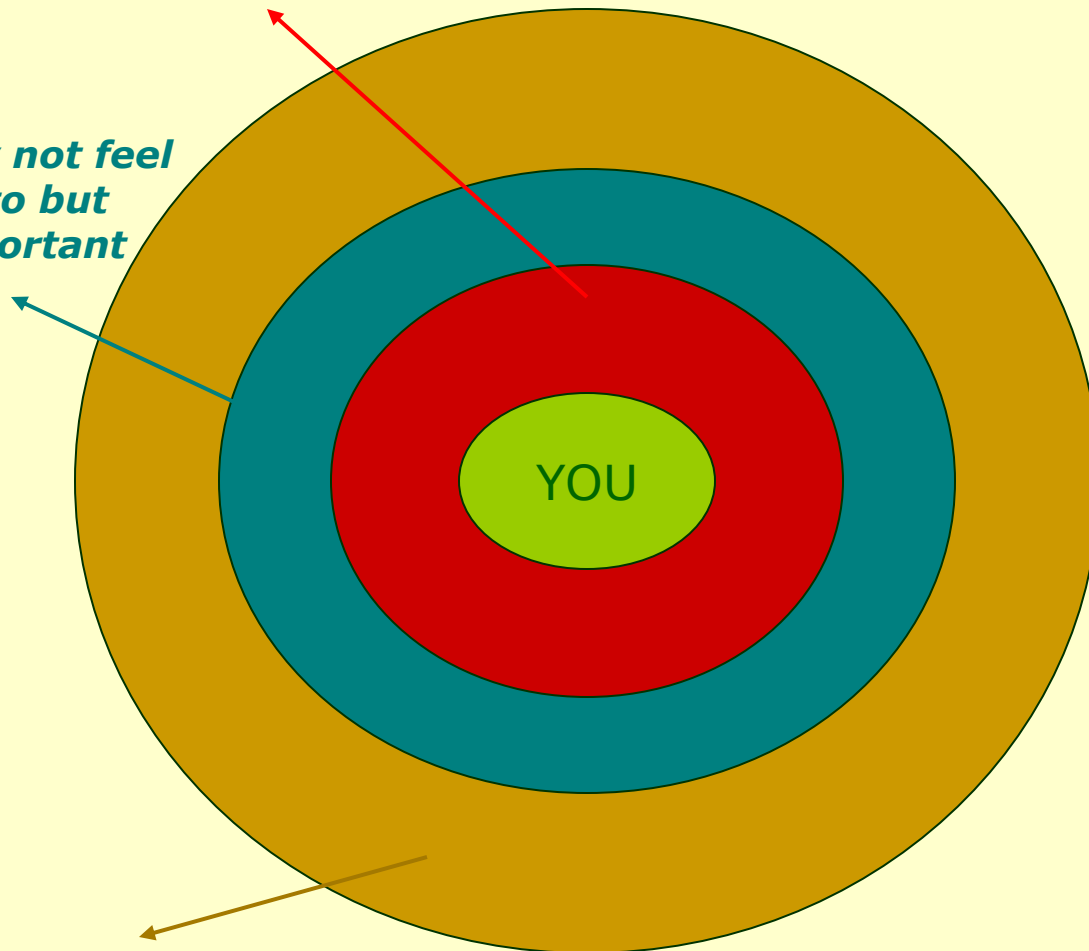
"People you haven't mentioned yet, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be in your personal network map."

Domains for Interview Questions

- Relational history and anticipated future with each network member

- Missing supports and relationships

- Understanding of permanency planning and long-term preferences for adoption and reunification

- Definition of family, closeness, feeling supported, and "permanence" in relationships

- Advice for youth in foster care, caseworkers, and foster parents

Using Ambiguous Loss Theory (Boss, 1999, Samuels, 2008)

- Lacks clear boundaries, finality, or endings
- No societally recognized rituals for grieving loss
- Family systems and individuals are left to find their own way out, cope on their own
- This can be very shaming, stigmatizing, isolating
- Great uncertainty, no event to initiate process of adjustment or healing
- Persons cope by freezing grief to seek emotional control
- AL's are understood to be most traumatic losses to suffer because no resolution is obtainable and thus, the loss is endured repeatedly and indefinitely
- This study theorizes foster youth experience chronic and multiple crossover Type I and Type II ALs

Using Relevant Theory and Literature As Theoretical Frameworks for Analysis

Figure 1. Foster Care as Ambiguous Crossover Loss

Type I Physically Absent Psychologically Present	Type II Physically Present Psychologically Absent	Crossover Re-occurring ambiguities of both Type I and II
• Immigration/migration • Adoption • Divorce	• Alzheimer's disease • Chronic mental illness • Coma • Addictions	• Foster Care

The Experience of Chronic Crossover Ambiguous Losses as <u>Normative Developmental Experience for Foster Youth</u>

TYPE I
(physical absence)

- Removal from family of origin

- Separation from siblings and extended family

- Multiple placement moves

- Changes in social workers

- Dissolved adoptions

- Revocation of foster care status and placement

Type II
(psychological absence)

- Parental mental illness

- Parental drug or alcohol addiction

- Weakened or fractured attachments in family of origin

- Lost sense of "belonging," "family," or "home"

Phenomenological experience of the parental relationship as embedded in ambiguous loss of "family," and "home"

In the beginning it gets kind of...like shaky ground because ... you don't expect for your biological mom or...dad to turn their backs on you and give you up. So that kind of throws you off. And so you are going from foster home to foster home. And people telling you that, "I'm going to be your mom and so you are going to be here." And then a couple of weeks or a month longer you are going on to the next person talking about __they__ are going to be your home. So that kind of screws with your mind a little...because you lose the --- you get desensitized to the word "family."   Thunder

"In foster care you don't really have a sense of home..."   Toni

Caveats to Personal Network Members and Understanding Relationships

- Presence in network map ≠ relational permanence or closeness
  - Relationships are not fixed unchanging entities

- Biological parents in inner circle can sometimes represent familial obligation, hope/wish for emotionally close relationship

"She's my mom, she brought me into this world ... No matter what she will do I will never just completely turn my back on her. I love my family even if they don't love me." Justice

Caveats to interpreting study findings

- Sample is heavily female (n=20)

- Findings most applicable to youth and young adults who have access to organized support structure

- There are other factors (e.g., mental health, gender, culture) that shape and affect relationship building not of direct focus in this study

- This is a single-perception study

Characteristics of Study Participants

Gender
Female   20
Male   9

Age
17   1
19-20   5
21-23   18
24-26   5

Race/Ethnicity
African American   15
White   10
Latino/a (Mexican American)   3
Multiracial *   1

Current Living Arrangement
Alone in apartment   14
With spouse/partner   6
With adult relative   6
With foster parents   1
With adult support person   1
With siblings   1

Age at First Foster Care Placement
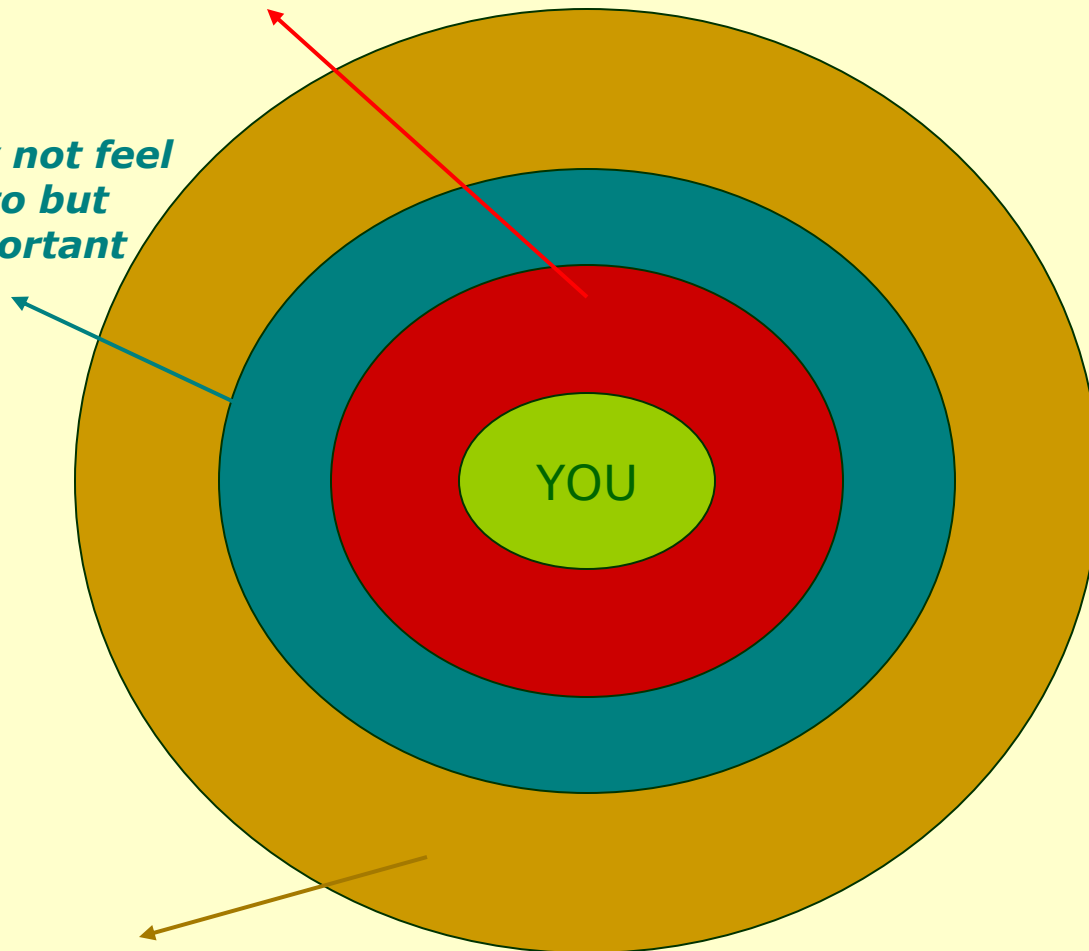1-3   3
4-6   4
7-10   8
11-13   11
14-16   3

Number of Placements
1-2   9
3-6   15
7-10   3
11 or more 2

*Puerto Rican/West Indian/Cherokee/Japanese

Personal Network Map (Antonucci, 1986).

"People you are so close to it is hard to imagine life without them."

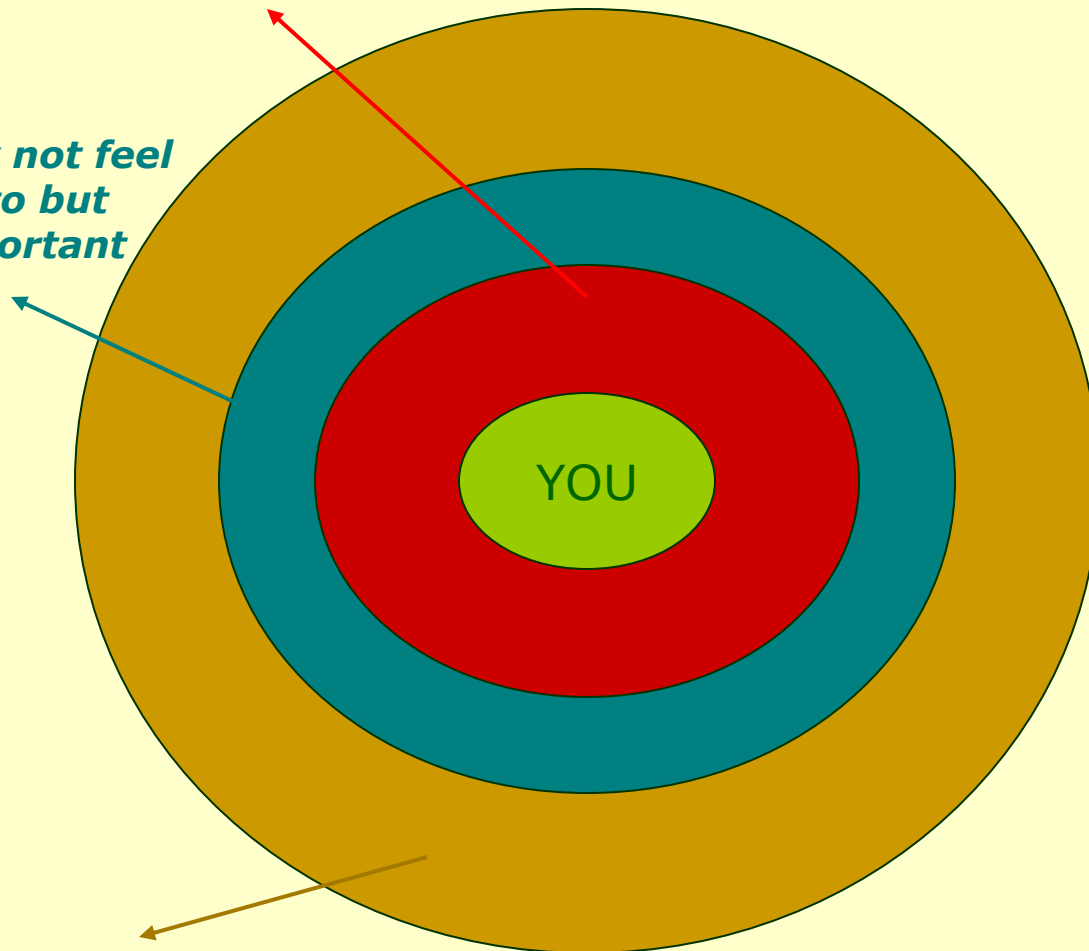*"People you may not feel quite that close to but who are still important to you."*

YOU

"People you haven't mentioned yet, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be in your personal network map."

Personal Network Map (Antonucci, 1986).

"People you are so close to it is hard to imagine life without them."

"People you may not feel quite that close to but who are still important to you."

YOU

"People you haven't mentioned yet, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be in your personal network map."

People you can't imagine life without

Adult family members and siblings dominate this ring of relationships
- 18 named adult kin
- 16 named sibling

Some named key caseworkers/social workers (n=8)

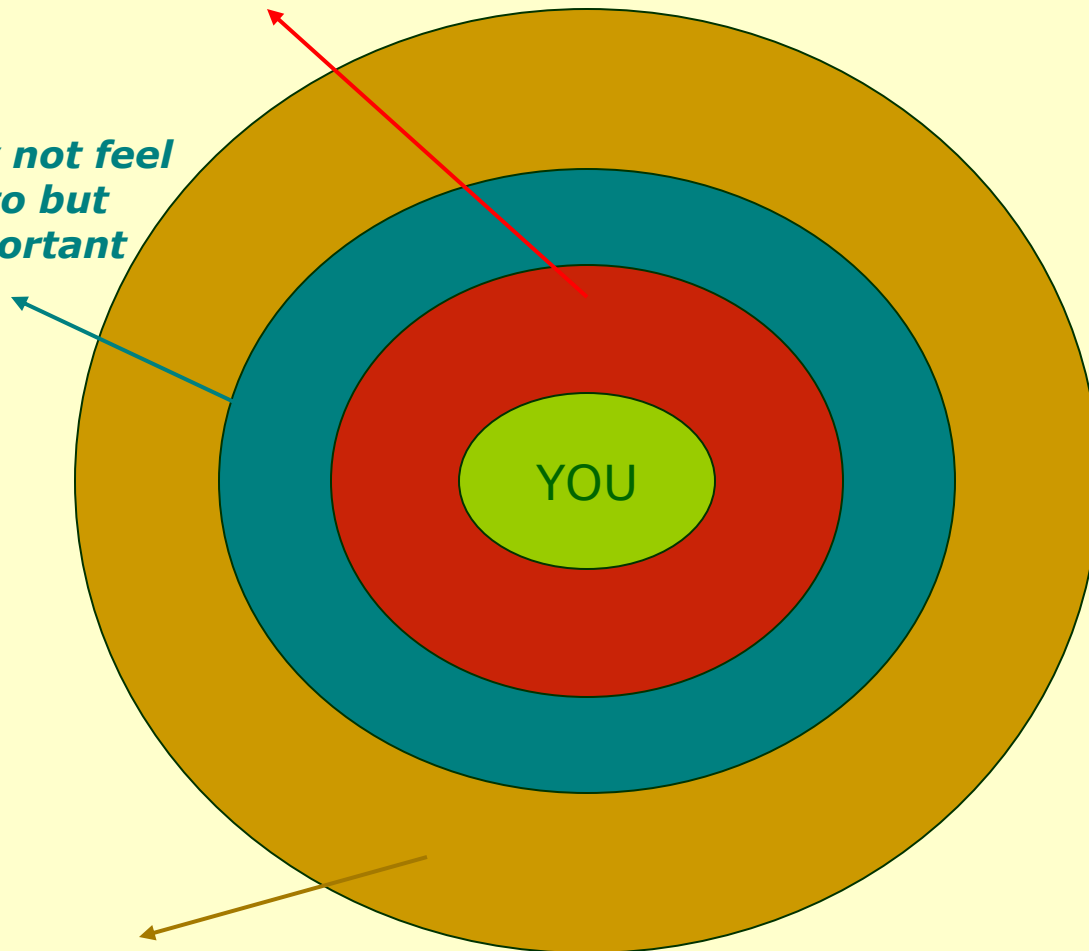Few included biological parents (8 included moms, 2 included dads)

Very few named foster parents (n=5)

Dual role/"everything" people here

Personal Network Map (Antonucci, 1986).

"People you are so close to it is hard to imagine life without them."

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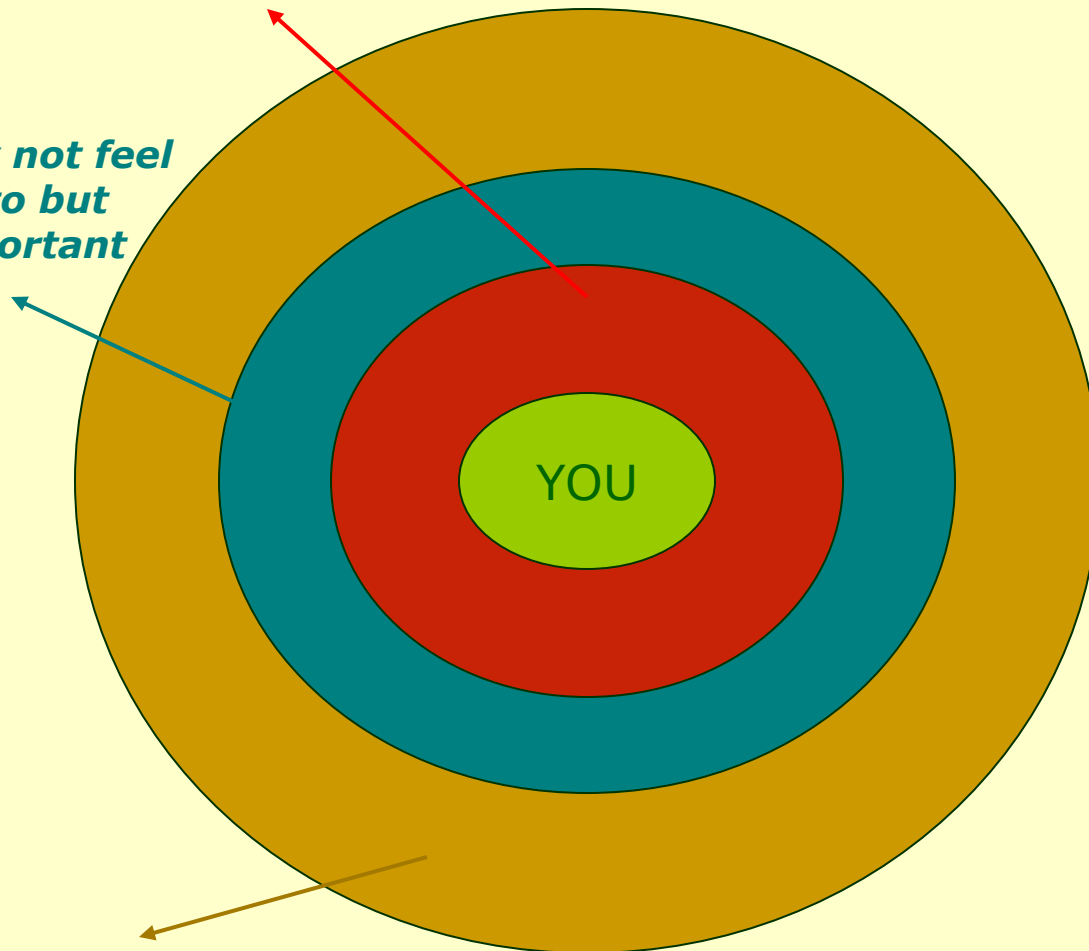**"People you may not feel quite that close to but who are still important to you."**

YOU

"People you haven't mentioned yet, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be in your personal network map."

People you may not feel quite that close to but who are still important to you

Adult support continues to outweigh peers

Small increase of those naming important relationships with professionals (n=11)

Most frequently sited "professionals" were caseworkers (n=6) or adults tied to their participation in Opportunity Passport™
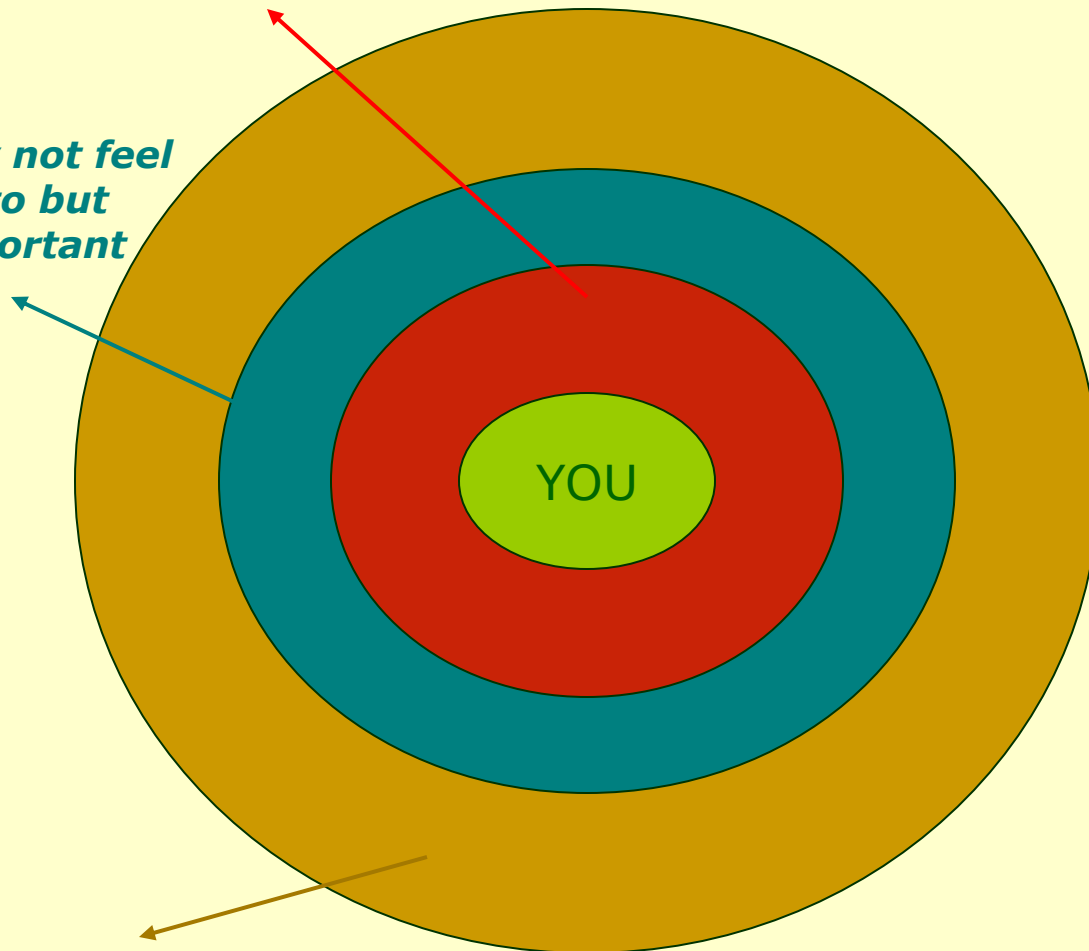
All young people had at least one person they considered family within this circle of relationships

Five named biological moms, four named biological dads

Personal Network Map (Antonucci, 1986).

"People you are so close to it is hard to imagine life without them."

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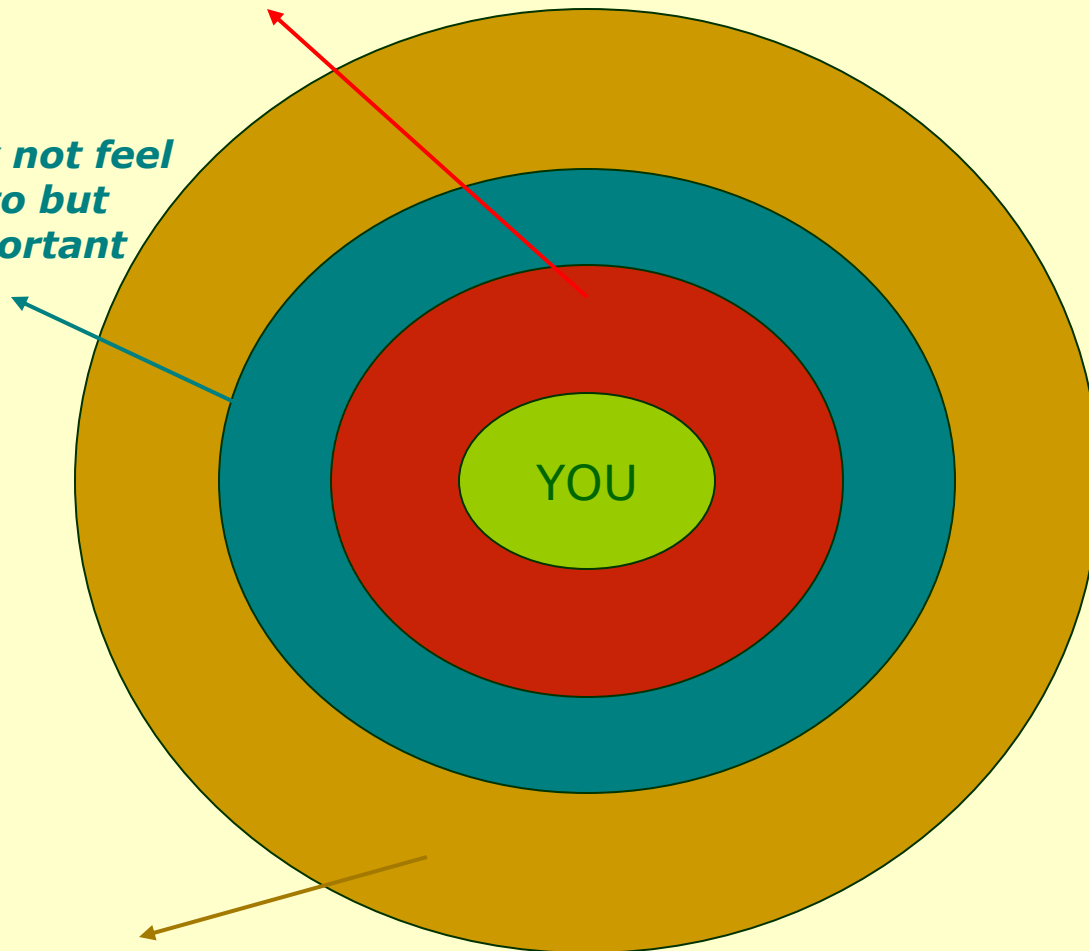**"People you may not feel quite that close to but who are still important to you."**

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People you haven't mentioned yet, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be in your personal network map

Decreases across all categories of people

Five left this circle blank

Largest group of adult supporters were tied to Opportunity Passport™

Adult kin support drops to equal non-kin support
- 1 biological mom named
- 1 foster mom named

21 systems or organizations listed in outer circle of support (e.g., "my whole family" or "my church")

Interpretive Findings: In-depth Interviews with Young Adults

- Receiving Support from Adults versus Peers

- Child Welfare Professionals and Programs as Support

- The meaning of permanence in the context of foster care

- Coping with Ambiguous loss: A Reason a Season and a Lifetime

The meaning of Relational (Im)Permanence in the Context of Foster Care

Understanding of permanence:

- In Policy

- In Practice

- In perception of ones family-like relationships

Everybody that has been in my life they just disappear because some other party messes it up."
Soliel

Holding on to Important Relationships

Holding on to (& Loosing) Caseworkers as Family Support…

She felt that I am grown, I have a daughter and my own family and stuff so she don't need to be in the midst of me. But I was telling her that you are supposed to be there for me. Like mothers don't change they will no matter how old they child gets. My daughter will change 'cause she is growing up. She is going to go out and do her own thing, but the mother is going to make sure that the child is okay. She be like, "*I am not your mother!"* It was kind of tough.

The Adoption option: The meaning of belonging, kinship, and "home"

- Issues of family of origin loyalty

- Knowledge of adopter preferences for children who were younger, white, and female

- Distrust of adoption as route to feeling a sense of home, love, and belonging

Personal experience of permanence

Adoption as surrendering one's membership and belonging in family of origin

I didn't want to become theirs because once I am adopted I am *theirs*. My parents, I still want to be with them. I am not with them. But if I get adopted that is just different. I am the other people's. I am not my mom and dad's. They are going to be there always. But if I am adopted, I belong to these people now. It is not even like belonging—it is just like they *adopt* you. But if they are saying just because there is nothing different about being adopted, then why would you have someone be adopted then? Right? So that is why—you become theirs. And then once you get adopted, you can never be with your mom and dad again until you turn 18 or get an adult. I didn't want that.

Being adopted doesn't guarantee familial love and belonging

I didn't wanna be adopted because I knew that [it] wouldn't benefit me … I definitely wanted the relationship. [But] to me being adopted doesn't necessarily mean you're gonna have a good relationship … a wonderful relationship with somebody. It's just a paper that says you belong to someone. Just because you belong to someone doesn't mean they're gonna care for you. I belonged to my mother. She didn't care for me. So I mean … what's on paper isn't what's important to me. But I did want a relationship where that bond was really strong, you know, a mother and father. Yeah, I *did* want that.

Healing From Ambiguous Loss

Youth listed emotional support as the most needed and most missing support

Navigating Ambiguous Losses on one's own: The need for emotional not technical support

Being in the system they'll … teach you how to go to work, they'll try to teach you how to go to school, how to do hygiene. But they don't never teach you how to really grow up and deal with what you've been through so you don't just crack up somewhere

I would like to still go to counseling. Back then … I was going to counseling I wasn't using it. I wasn't going in there being honest about everything. I'm older now … and I don't have that … I kinda wish that I would've dealt with a lot of stuff back then when I had the chance to.

A reason, a season, and a lifetime.....

A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime

People come into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. When you figure out which one it is, you will know what to do.

When someone is in your life for a REASON, it is usually to meet a need you have expressed. They have come to assist you through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support, to aid you physically, emotionally, or spiritually. They may seem like a godsend, and they are! They are there for the reason you need them to be.

Then, without any wrong doing on your part, or at an inconvenient time, this person will say or do something to bring the relationship to an end. Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away. Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand.

What we must realize is that our need has been met, our desire fulfilled, their work is done. The prayer you sent up has been answered. And now it is time to move on.

When people come into your life for a SEASON, it is because your turn has come to share, grow, or learn.
They bring you an experience of peace, or make you laugh.
They may teach you something you have never done.
They usually give you an unbelievable amount of joy. Believe it! It is real! But, only for a season.

LIFETIME relationships teach you lifetime lessons; things you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional foundation. Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person, and put what you have learned to use in all other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind, but friendship is clairvoyant.

Author unknown

A reason, a season, and a lifetime: Healing from relational impermanence

I see … a point where I had to get to and I had to realize you have some people in your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime

And you just, certain people come into your life to help you get to a certain point and they have to probably just leave you. Not to say that they want to abandon you, but they were only meant to bring you to this point so you can go out and fly on your own. That is what I accept.

You know, you always think that you make a relationship as an adult and you expect them to be there forever. But you know, when you make 'em in the program, then it's a possibility that they could leave. You know, they have lives, too.
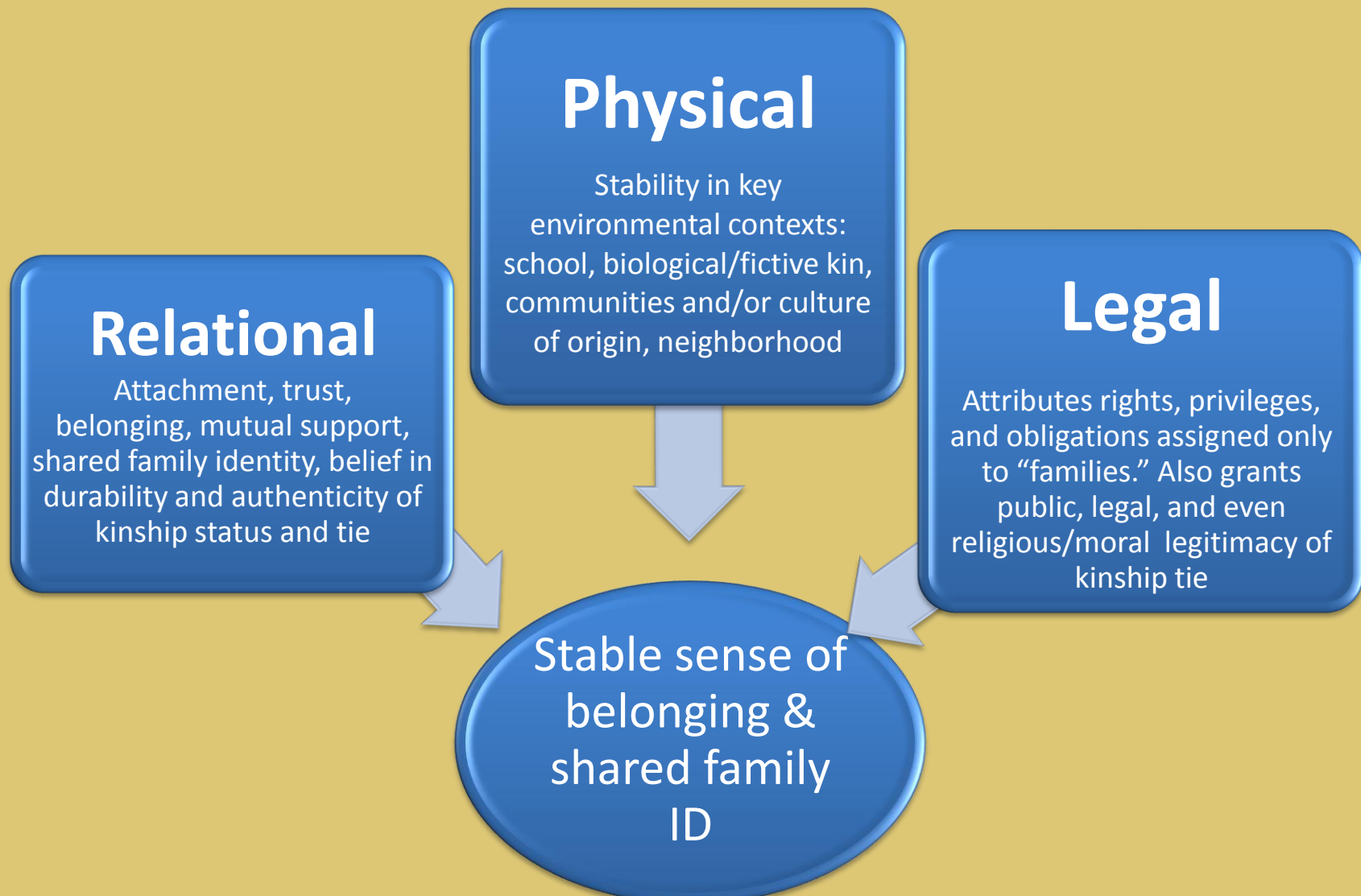
Reunification in adulthood: The complexity of healing relationships with biological parents

She lives in a hotel across the street from me. I know I need a relationship with her. I want to have a relationship with my mom. I want my mom to genuinely love me. But, I don't see it. I put her in my network because … I know it's gonna sound strange— she support me but not knowingly. Like—Okay... I need to know that my mom is okay... I need to have a relationship with her, but it's not like she's really ... we don't … Like … having her *there* is good for me emotionally, but she's not doing everything she's supposed to do. I just ...wanna have a relationship with my mom. Really ... everything I do for *her* ... is *me* doing something for *her*. But in the interim she's supporting me but she don't know it. She's supporting me by being there because she never was there. And no person in their right mind—I resent her for not being [there], but like God say, you have to forgive, and I know that I need her because she's my mom, you know?... She's always saying, "Oh, you guys are grown now. It's time for me to do me." And I'm like, "When did you ever do us?" So, I would like for her to eventually realize that she have children, and to try to be a parent to us. She needs to get some stability in her life and, you know, try to be a mother to us.

Conclusions

- Legal permanence is important to achieve social status, recognition, privileges, responsibilities, and protections afforded to being "family"

- Achieving "relational permanence" requires interventions and supports that address healing and recovery, build trust, and allow for grieving relational losses

- Need for models of practice that foster multifamily ID rather than mutually exclusive family ID models

- Achieving legal permanence does not cause relational permanence—need for intentionality in (re)building and supporting complex but growth-fostering kinship networks for children, youth, family systems, & communities

COMPATIBLE NOT COMPETATIVE MEANINGS OF PERMANENCE

Physical

Stability in key environmental contexts: school, biological/fictive kin, communities and/or culture of origin, neighborhood

Relational

Attachment, trust, belonging, mutual support, shared family identity, belief in durability and authenticity of kinship status and tie

Legal

Attributes rights, privileges, and obligations assigned only to "families." Also grants public, legal, and even religious/moral legitimacy of kinship tie

Stable sense of belonging & shared family ID

Re-articulating relationships within and between three child welfare goals

safety + perm. ≠ well-being

Relational traumas Require relational Approaches to Healing

- **Complex trauma and adverse life experiences** can leave lifetime genetic, cognitive, social, and emotional residue (Felitti, 2002; van der Kolk, 2005)

- **Brain research** indicates relationships during adolescence either provide opportunities for corrective and restorative neurological growth or deeply ingrain earlier disruptions caused by negative relational histories (Weinberger, Elvavag, & Giedd, 2005)

- **Relational skills/healing:** Grief work, narrative, family- based approaches, and direct attention to ambiguous losses and relational disconnections are central to work with all youth…even those who experience permanence (i.e., are adopted or reunify)